

Chapter 1

Introduction

Models, Theory and Marginality in Roman Archaeology

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This special edition of *Archaeology North West*, produced jointly by the Council for British Archaeology North West, the Field Archaeology Centre at the University of Manchester, and Chester Archaeology is the first monograph to be published on the Iron Age and Romano-British landscape of North West England.

Background to the Study

The origins of this volume lie in a one day conference, *Living on the Edge: Romano-British Rural Settlement in North West England*, held by the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit and CBA North West in November 1995. That conference brought together for the first time most of the leading regional researchers in this field. The intention then, and now, was to publish the proceedings, not as a final statement on the subject but as notes in progress, so to speak, with the intention of stimulating further research and debate. However, in the four years since that conference our knowledge of late prehistoric and Romano-British rural settlement of the region has developed considerably, and we felt it would be invidious not to acknowledge this in the final publication. Consequently, although many of the original speakers have contributed to the present volume the format and content of the work is far removed from the 1995 conference, reflecting more accurately current research directions, knowledge and theories.

This volume is a departure in another way, since it is the first time that CBA North West has published a thematic research volume, albeit still under the banner of our bi-annual bulletin *Archaeology North West*. Unlike in many parts of Britain, CBA North West is the only archaeological organisation that covers the whole of the region and embraces all sides of the discipline; amateur and professional, academic and arm-chair archaeologist. We therefore have a particular responsibility in promoting archaeology in the broadest sense. It is our hope that this volume will be the first of an occasional series of themed publications, under the *Archaeology North West* banner, concentrating on new areas of research within the region.

The subject studied by this first thematic volume is that of the late prehistoric and Romano-British countryside, and the study area is the modern counties

of Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside. Inevitably the geographical focus of this volume is largely dictated by the location and interests of the contributors, hence the bias towards the southern part of our region. Nevertheless, it is precisely this area where most of the new finds and research has been conducted. Fortunately, this is a geographically coherent area, which can be broadly described as the Mersey Basin; the catchment of the River Mersey, running from the Pennines in the east to the Irish Sea and the Halkyn Mountains of the Welsh borders in the west, and from the Rivington uplands in the north to the Shropshire Plain in the south.

Whilst there are many modern studies on individual Romano-British sites within the North West, there are few which deal, in chronological depth, with the rural hinterlands of the Roman forts and towns of the region. It is hoped, therefore, that this volume will prove useful in promoting studies in these areas.

To move from producing a journal of record to a research volume places a range of burdens both upon the authors and the reader. Firstly, we have had to confront the problem of the historical validity of the North West, a term which has only gained currency during the 20th century. The fundamental problem is that the North West is not a coherent region; it is rather a collection of geographical, economic and political expressions, which vary according to the needs of different groups. This is perhaps best illustrated by contrasting the traditional CBA North West area with that of the newly constituted North West Regional Development Agency. Since its inception in the years immediately following the Second World War CBA North West has encompassed, first the historic counties of Lancashire and Cheshire, and latterly the modern counties of Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside, an area which since 1974 has included parts of the ancient county of Yorkshire. When the North West Regional Development Agency came into being in April 1999 it embraced not only Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside, but also the county of Cumbria. In view of the artificial nature of our region the contributors have not felt compelled to address themselves to the region as a whole, thus giving us the opportunity to explore a variety of themes in greater depth through local as well as regional studies. However, the scope of this work

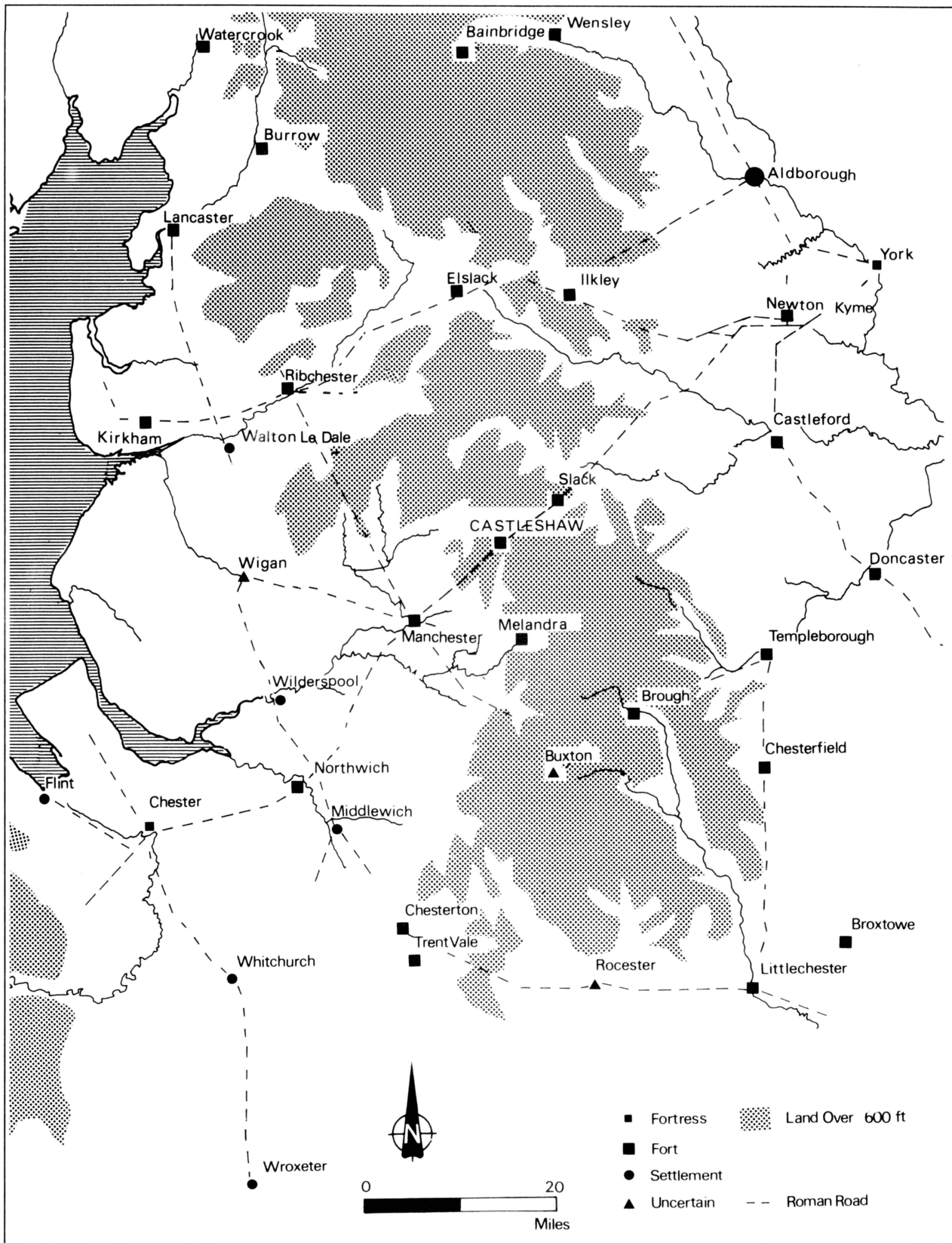


Fig 1.1 Major Roman sites in North West and northern central England.

remains that of the CBA regional group; namely Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside.

Research also places a new burden upon the reader, for whereas the previous issues of *Archaeology North*

West have been content to report new finds and facts, research places much more emphasis on the interpretation of facts and requires from the reader a more questioning or sceptical attitude. The construction of a history and archaeology of cause and effect is an

activity that can easily lead to a piling of hypothesis upon hypothesis. The contributors have tried to avoid many possible pitfalls by explicitly stating theoretical or controversial view points; but the danger of misperception on our part still exists.

Given that this volume presents new challenges, one might ask why we have chosen to make the attempt. There are two main reasons. Firstly, in its review of England's archaeology, and the particular issue of archaeological transition, English Heritage concluded that: 'more work is required to enable archaeology to contribute to important debates and controversies which have been largely the province of economic historians' (English Heritage 1997, 45). The impact of the Roman Empire on the countryside is one of those areas. The second reason is that the North West is an area where our existing evidence for the key periods of archaeological transition is uneven, thus offering a wide scope for future research. Whilst the region is pre-eminent in the evidence for the shift from a medieval, rural, society to an industrial, urban, society, the evidence for the introduction of farming, at the Mesolithic/Neolithic boundary, or the transition from stone tool using societies to metal using ones (late Neolithic to Bronze Age periods) is very sparse. There is one period of transition, however, for which there already exists a large body of data, albeit skewed towards military archaeology; the era of the Roman Imperial conquest.

Theory and Practice

The Romano-British period, together with its associated social and cultural changes, has left a rich archaeological record across much of western and southern Europe, northern Africa and the Middle East. In Britain it is a period that is perceived as being well known and extensively studied. At least within the North West the period is marked by the appearance of large military sites and, for the first time, associated urban centres (Fig 1.1). Despite over two centuries of scholarly study we are only just beginning to investigate the impact of the Roman military presence on the indigenous Iron Age population, who made their living from subsistence farming in a climatically and agriculturally marginal area. It is now clear that at least in this region there is a growing need to understand the origins and ultimate destination of Romanisation, since this era of transition, with its interplay between subsistence farming, the landscape and the climate, may provide models and parallels applicable and/or useful when studying other episodes of transition, such as the shift from hunter-gathering to farming, or the change from a rural to an industrial society.

The sheer scale of the changes wrought by the growth of the Roman Empire has resulted in a whole host of historical analyses and explanations ranging from grand theory, down to detailed studies of individual sites. The contributions to the debate made by archaeologists have been equally variable but have tended, on the whole, to lean towards studies of the mechanics or physical

character of individual finds, sites, structures or industries. Until comparatively recently British archaeologists working on the Roman Empire have shied away from the use of theory and model building in the ways familiar to prehistorians. This tendency, at least amongst many of the Roman archaeologists working in the North West and northern Britain, is understandable given the sheer scale of the historical data available, coupled with the depth of the theories of economic historians specialising in the ancient world, but, as English Heritage observed, it may have meant that their contribution to the debate has not been as great as it could have been.

Consequently this volume is not just concerned with reporting recent finds in the field, but rather is an attempt to provide a theoretical framework both for the location and interpretation of late prehistoric and Romano-British rural sites within the region. The unifying theme of this work has been an exploration of the concept of marginality. As a theme this might at first glance appear somewhat vague. As Pollard has recently observed 'the concept lacks precision in at least two senses; in the sense of what constitutes marginality, and in drawing the boundary of such an area' (Pollard 1997, 9). However, Pollard has also demonstrated the impact of two main types of marginality; political and economic (Pollard 1997, 10-7). In North West terms we might be able to see the impact of each during the late prehistoric and Romano-British era. Firstly, in the political issue of centre versus periphery, the issue appears to be the pull between the centre as an overriding significance which seeks to open up, subject, and colonise the fringe, and the fringe which might come to dominate the system of which it was a notionally periphery (Millett 1990). These stresses could be expressed physically as much as intellectually and in the North West, which lay at the extreme north-western edge of the Roman Empire, might be recoverable from the archaeological data. Secondly, economic marginality, which is more about the natural features of a region rather than its political make-up. In pre-industrial, non-urbanised, societies this economic marginality was expressed in how good the land was for cultivation. Typically there were three types of landscape which made regions marginal in Europe; mountains, forests and fen or marshland, and the North West has all three in some abundance. However, some of these marginal regions became highly productive economically once industrialisation took hold. Therefore, we should be wary of dismissing such areas as always being economically marginal just because they were marginal for subsistence agriculture (Dark & Dark 1995). There is also a third kind of marginality which Pollard touched upon, that of intellectual marginality, best seen in a disregard for other societies, places and concepts. This too can be seen in the North West, but it is not a product of the data itself, but of the people studying that information.

Thus, the concept and physical expression of a marginal area is not fixed but changes according to the differing needs of the societies it encompasses.

The Aim of the Study

How applicable and valid these ideas and approaches are to the study of the North West is the purpose of this work. Therefore, the volume is structured so as to provide a step by step guide through current theoretical approaches and research on the late prehistoric and Romano-British landscape.

In the first section two articles deal with a variety of theoretical approaches and models for understanding late prehistoric settlement and the transition to being part of the Roman Empire. In the first Michael Nevell uses eco-deterministic models to show that large parts of the region were agriculturally marginal at different times. These models also suggest a rise in settlement activity beginning a century before the arrival of the Roman army, but markedly increasing thereafter. In the second article Keith Matthews uses anthropological parallels and models to suggest a hierarchical pattern of settlement in the Roman period of a type familiar from many parts of Britain and the Empire, arguing against the region being marginal, at least in the economic sense.

The second section analyses the problems of site location and identification within the Mersey Basin which have bedevilled the search for rural settlement for many years. Jill Collens discusses the usefulness of repeated aerial reconnaissance in a region traditionally seen as unconducive to cropmark formation because of the extensive coverage of claylands and the urban sprawl of Chester, Liverpool and Manchester. As both she and Keith Maude emphasise, however, such data will remain enigmatic unless it is coupled with a systematic programme of field investigation in order to provide the new sites with a date and function.

The final section is a series of four case studies dealing with the issues of marginality and the transition from a local subsistence prehistoric society, to a fringe area of a single province within the Roman Empire. Detailed discussion of the excavations at Great Woollen Hall

and Irby, the region's two most closely studied late prehistoric and Romano-British rural settlements, by Michael Nevell, Robert Philpott and Mark Adams reveal aspects of these settlements that are both familiar and unfamiliar from other parts of Britain. Two further papers study in detail one upland valley within the southern Pennines and the affect of the Roman occupation on this area. The work of Norman Redhead and Barbara Brayshay reveal's a tightly managed pastoral during the early part of the Roman period, perhaps as a direct result of the Roman military presence at Castleshaw with its parasitic extra-mural settlement.

What all these papers show is a region that was marginal in many ways. Geographically, climatic changes meant that the Pennine foothills were agriculturally marginal for much of the late prehistoric period, but not during the Roman era, whilst highly local conditions in the valleys could favour subsistence farming in most centuries. Politically, in the late prehistoric period the area was marginal in as much as it lay on the boundary between at least three tribal groupings; the Brigantes, Deceangli and Cornovii. This perhaps explains an emerging settlement hierarchy that lacks large central places as foci of power and status. In the Roman period the Mersey Basin and the North West remained politically marginal, with power concentrated in the south-eastern part of the province and in the heart of the Empire, Rome. Economically, however, it was not marginal, since there is growing evidence for a large expansion in agriculture during this era in both the lowland and upland areas of the region.

The North West is thus an area that historically has been a marginal or transitional region. Therefore, the interplay between the political, economic and geographical forces in this area have much to contribute to our understanding of such zones in general and in particular the development of this area in later periods of cultural transition.